Redeeming the Captive
Rabbi Dan Moskovitz – June 6, 2014

1. Today marks the 70th anniversary of the Allied invasion of Normandy.
    a. The greatest assembly of forces of good to eradicate evil in the history of the world.
    b. Canadian forces who landed at Juno Beach played a pivotal role in securing a landing and ultimately bring the war to a close.
    c. We recall their bravery and honour their memory. Those that died in battle and those that are rapidly fading from view.
    d. Collectively we look to that war as a just and great war, its soldier we call members of the Greatest Generation and re rightfully revere them, their sacrifice and their service
2. It is ironic in many ways then the juxiposition of those commemerative headlines this week with the story of Sgt Bowe Bergdahl. The young US Army POW held for the past 5 years by the Taliban.
    a. If you have been following the story you know his redemption from the hands of his captors in exchange for the release of 5 senior Taliban leaders from Guantanamo Prison is not without controversy.
        i. Some say he was a deserter and therefore the US military had no responsibility to rescue him.
        ii. Some say he sought to join the enemy.
        iii. Other say the price of 5 for one was too high.
        iv. And some say that his father who learned to speak Pashto and grew a bear to mark the 5 years his son was in captivity, is a Muslim and Taliban

sympathizer therefore also not worth the effort.

   b. There are other charges, of politics, illegality, conspiracy
   c. In sum – what would appear to be a clear responsibility to uphold a military code to not leave a soldier on the battlefield is not so clear to many.
3. But it is crystal clear to Judaism and to Jewish law.
4. The admonition to redeem captives "pidyon shvuyim" appears in the books of Leviticus and Nehemiah, as well as in the Talmud, Shulhan Arukh and writings of Maimonides.
   a. Maimonides wrote (Hilchot Matnot Aniyim 8:12): "The redeeming of captives takes precedence over the feeding and clothing of the poor. Indeed there is no religious duty more important than the redeeming of captives, for not only is the captive included in the generality of the hungry, the thirsty, and the naked, but his very life is in jeopardy."
5. David Brooks – a politically conservative columnist for the NY Times wrote:
   a. It doesn't matter if Bergdahl had deserted his post or not. It doesn't matter if he is a confused young man who said insulting and shameful things about his country and his Army. The debt a nation owes to its soldiers in uniform is not based on individual merit. It is based on citizenship, and loyalty to the national community we all share.
   b. Soldiers don't risk their lives only for those citizens who deserve it; they do it for the nation as a whole.
6. Brooks continues to point out:
   a. Israel once traded 1,027 Palestinian prisoners to get back one of their own.

    b. Another time they traded 1,150 prisoners to get back three of their own.
    c. They did it because of a deep awareness that national cohesion is essential to national survival.
    d. They did it because Israeli parents share a common emotional bond; the imprisonment of one of their children touches them all.
        i. In polarized countries, especially, you have to take care of your own. If you don't, the corrosive effects will be cumulative.
7. 70 years ago today, 10s of thousands of soldiers risked their lives for an ideal, a Jewish ideal
    a. That every person is created in the image of God and therefore bears inestimable and unassailable value. They fought against he darkness and brought the light
    b. This week on a smaller battlefield a politician risked what little political capital he has left to do the same thing.
        i. The risk was no way comparable but the cause was a microcosm of the same 70 years ago.
        ii. It was the right thing to do, it was a mitzvah and if necessary just as Israel has done, he should do it again.